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p 94

GREYBEARDS

AT

PLAY.

GREYBEARDS AT PLAY

LITERATURE
AND ART
FOR OLD
GENTLEMEN

RHYMES AND SKETCHES
BY GILBERT CHESTERTON

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BARNICOTT AND PEARCE
PRINTERS

A DEDICATION

TO E.C.B.

He was, through boyhood's storm and
shower,
My best, my nearest friend ;
We wore one hat, smoked one cigar,
One standing at each end.

We were two hearts with single hope,
Two faces in one hood ;
I knew the secrets of his youth ;
I watched his every mood.

The little things that none but I
Saw were beyond his wont,
The streaming hair, the tie behind,
The coat tails worn in front.

I marked the absent-minded scream,
  The little nervous trick
Of rolling in the grate, with eyes
  By friendship's light made quick.

But youth's black storms are gone and
    past,
  Bare is each aged brow ;
And, since with age we're growing bald,
  Let us be babies now.

Learning we knew ; but still to-day,
  With spelling-book devotion,
Words of one syllable we seek
  In moments of emotion.

Riches we knew; and well dressed
dolls—
Dolls living—who expressed
No filial thoughts, however much
You thumped them in the chest.

Old happiness is grey as we,
And we may still outstrip her;
If we be slippered pantaloons,
Oh let us hunt the slipper!

The old world glows with colours clear;
And if, as saith the saint,
The world is but a painted show,
Oh let us lick the paint!

Far, far behind are morbid hours,
  And lonely hearts that bleed.
Far, far behind us are the days,
  When we were old indeed.

Leave we the child : he is immersed
  With scientists and mystics :
With deep prophetic voice he cries
  Canadian food statistics.

But now I know how few and small,
  The things we crave need be—
Toys and the universe and you—
  A little friend to tea.

Behold the simple sum of things,
  Where, in one splendour spun,
The stars go round the Mulberry Bush,
  The Burning Bush, the Sun.

Now we are old and wise and grey,
  And shaky at the knees ;
Now is the true time to delight
  In picture books like these.

Hoary and bent I dance one hour :
  What though I die at morn ?
There is a shout among the stars,
  " To-night a child is born."

CONTENTS.

THE ONENESS OF THE PHILOSOPHER WITH NATURE.

THE ONENESS OF THE PHILOSOPHER WITH NATURE.

I LOVE to see the little stars
All dancing to one tune ;
I think quite highly of the Sun,
And kindly of the Moon.

The million forests of the Earth
  Come trooping in to tea.
The great Niagara waterfall
  Is never shy with me.

I am the tiger's confidant,
And never mention names :
The lion drops the formal "Sir,"
And lets me call him James.

Into my ear the blushing Whale
  Stammers his love. I know
Why the Rhinoceros is sad,
  —Ah, child! 'twas long ago.

I am akin to all the Earth
  By many a tribal sign :
The aged Pig will often wear
  That sad, sweet smile of mine.

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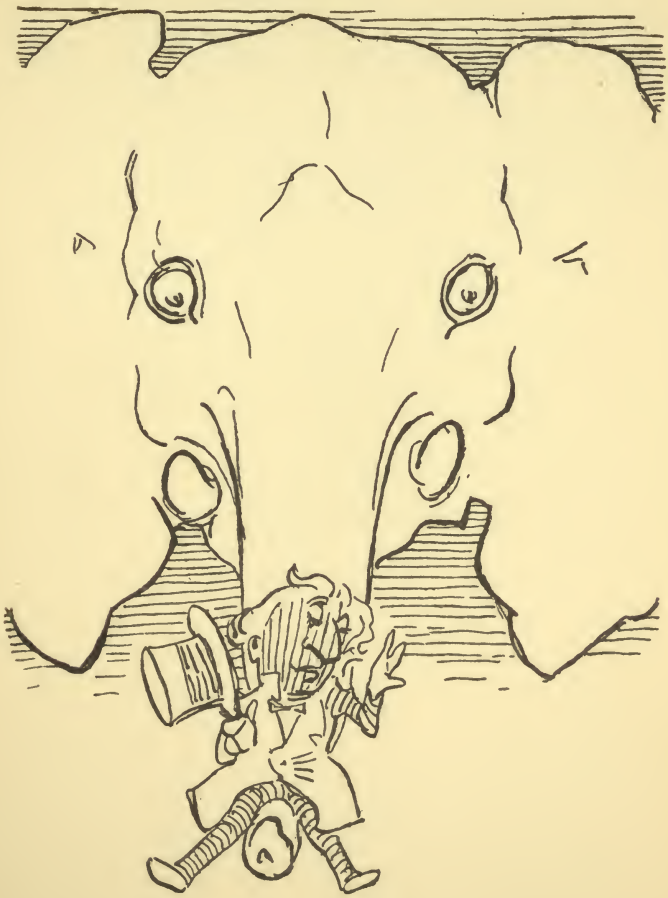
My niece, the Barnacle, has got
  My piercing eyes of black ;
The Elephant has got my nose,
  I do not want it back.

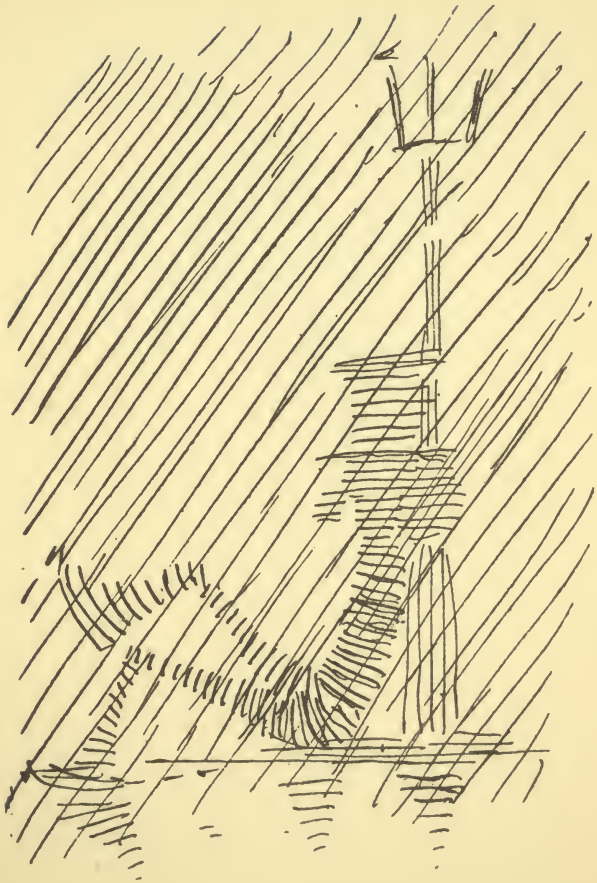


I know the strange tale of the Slug;
  The Early Sin—the Fall—
The Sleep—the Vision—and the Vow—
  The Quest—the Crown—the Call.

Since we were boys together,
I love the Vulture and the Shark:
I even love the weather,

And I have loved the Octopus.

I love to bask in sunny fields,
  And when that hope is vain,
I go and bask in Baker Street,
  All in the pouring rain.



D

Come snow! where fly, by some
strange law,
Hard snowballs—without noise—
Through streets untenanted, except
By good unconscious boys.

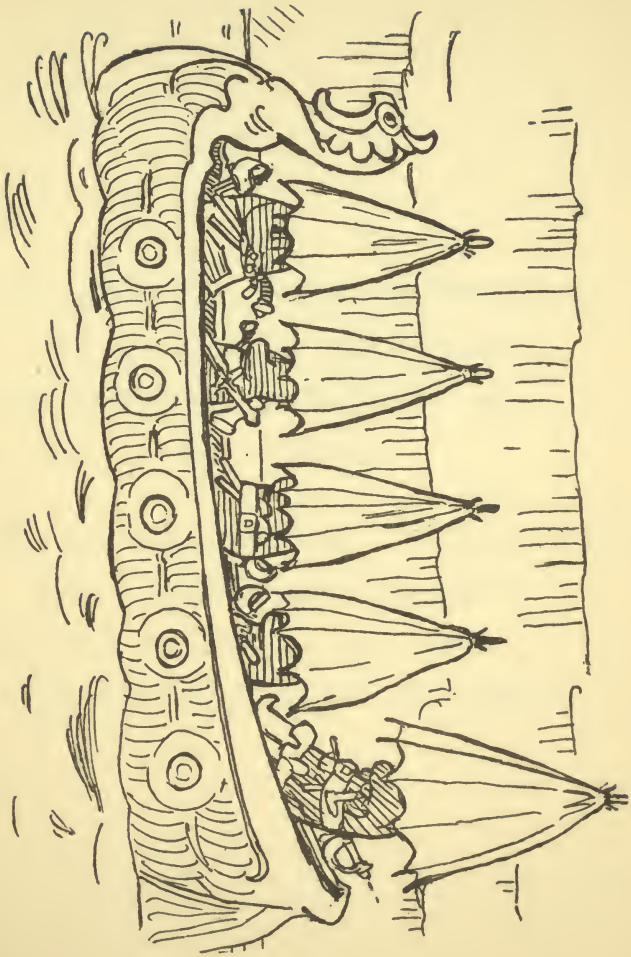
Come fog! exultant mystery—
  Where, in strange darkness rolled,
The end of my own nose becomes
  A lovely legend old.

Come snow, and hail, and thunderbolts,
  Sleet, fire, and general fuss ;
Come to my arms, come all at once—
  Oh photograph me thus !

OF THE DANGERS ATTENDING ALTRUISM ON THE HIGH SEAS.

OF THE DANGERS ATTENDING ALTRUISM ON THE HIGH SEAS.

Observe these Pirates bold and gay,
That sail a gory sea :
Notice their bright expression :—
The handsome one is me.



We plundered ships and harbours,
  We spoiled the Spanish main ;
But Nemesis watched over us,
  For it began to rain.

Oh all well-meaning folk take heed !
  Our Captain's fate was sore ;
A more well-meaning Pirate,
  Had never dripped with gore.

The rain was pouring long and loud,
  The sea was drear and dim ;
A little fish was floating there :
  Our Captain pitied him.

"How sad," he said, and dropped a tear
Splash on the cabin roof,
"That we are dry, while he is there
Without a waterproof.

"We'll get him up on board at once;
For Science teaches me,
He will be wet if he remains
Much longer in the sea."

They fished him out; the First Mate wept,
And came with rugs and ale :
The Boatswain brought him one golosh,
And fixed it on his tail.

But yet he never loved the ship ;
  Against the mast he'd lean ;
If spoken to, he coughed and smiled,
  And blushed a pallid green.

Though plied with hardbake, beef and
    beer,
  He showed no wish to sup :
The neatest riddles they could ask,
  He always gave them up.

They seized him and court-martialled
him,
In some excess of spleen,
For lack of social sympathy,
(Victoria xii. 18).

They gathered every evidence
That might remove a doubt :
They wrote a postcard in his name,
And partly scratched it out.

Till, when his guilt was clear as day,
With all formality
They doomed the traitor to be drowned,
And threw him in the sea.

The flashing sunset, as he sank,
  Made every scale a gem ;
And, turning with a graceful bow,
  He kissed his fin to them.

MORAL.

I AM, I think I have remarked,
  Terrifically old,
(The second Ice-age was a farce,
  The first was rather cold.)

A friend of mine, a trilobite
  Had gathered in his youth,
When trilobites *were* trilobites,
  This all-important truth.

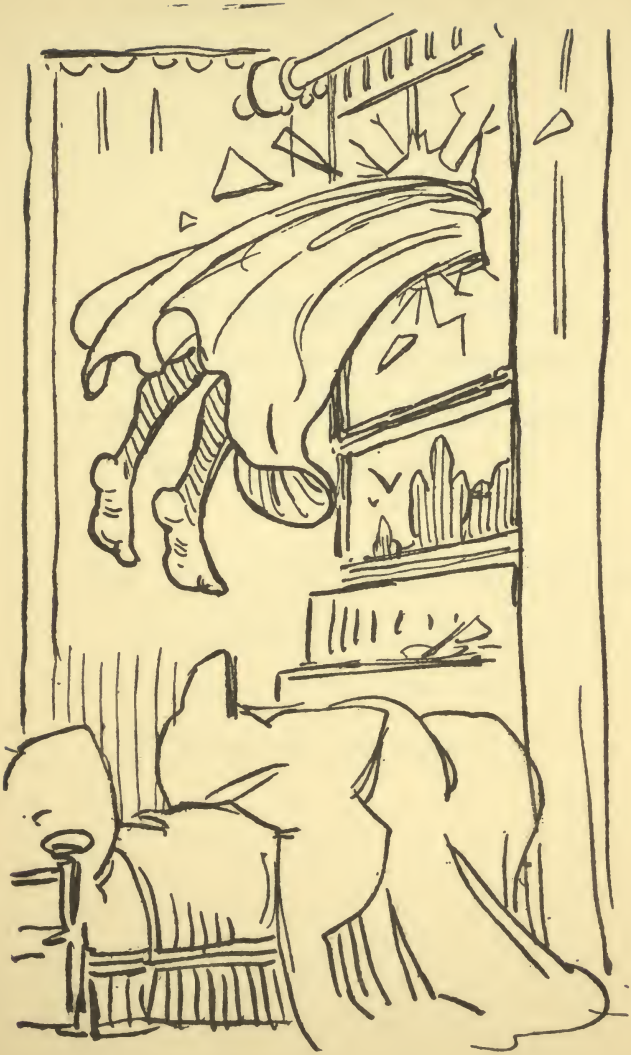
We aged ones play solemn parts—
  Sire—guardian—uncle—king.
Affection is the salt of life,
  Kindness a noble thing.

The old alone may comprehend
  A sense in my decree ;
But—if you find a fish on land,
  Oh throw it in the sea.

ON THE DISASTROUS SPREAD OF ÆSTHETICISM IN ALL CLASSES.

ON THE DISASTROUS SPREAD OF ÆSTHETICISM IN ALL CLASSES.

Impetuously I sprang from bed,
Long before lunch was up,
That I might drain the dizzy dew
From day's first golden cup.



In swift devouring ecstacy
  Each toil in turn was done ;
I had done lying on the lawn
  Three minutes after one.

For me, as Mr. Wordsworth says,
  The duties shine like stars ;
I formed my uncle's character,
  Decreasing his cigars.

But could my kind engross me? No!
Stern Art—what sons escape her?
Soon I was drawing Gladstone's nose
On scraps of blotting paper.

Then on—to play one-fingered tunes
  Upon my aunt's piano.
In short, I have a headlong soul,
  I much resemble Hanno.

(Forgive the entrance of the not
  Too cogent Carthaginian.
It may have been to make a rhyme ;
  I lean to that opinion).

Then my great work of book research
  Till dusk I took in hand—
The forming of a final, sound
  Opinion on *The Strand*.

But when I quenched the midnight oil,
  And closed *The Referee*,
Whose thirty volumes folio
  I take to bed with me,

I had a rather funny dream,
  Intense, that is, and mystic ;
I dreamed that, with one leap and yell,
  The world became artistic.

The Shopmen, when their souls were still,
Declined to open shops—


J. ROBINSON
BROWN
SMITH
JONES

And Cooks recorded frames of mind
In sad and subtle chops.

The stars were weary of routine :
  The trees in the plantation
Were growing every fruit at once,
  In search of a sensation.

The moon went for a moonlight stroll,
  And tried to be a bard,
And gazed enraptured at itself :
  I left it trying hard.

The sea had nothing but a mood
Of 'vague ironic gloom,'
With which t'explain its presence in
My upstairs drawing-room.

The sun had read a little book
  That struck him with a notion :
He drowned himself and all his fires
  Deep in the hissing ocean.

Then all was dark, lawless, and lost :
  I heard great devilish wings :
I knew that Art had won, and snapt
  The Covenant of Things.

I cried aloud, and I awoke,
  New labours in my head.
I set my teeth, and manfully
  Began to lie in bed.

Toiling, rejoicing, sorrowing,
  So I my life conduct.
Each morning see some task begun,
  Each evening see it chucked.

But still, in sudden moods of dusk,
  I hear those great weird wings,
Feel vaguely thankful to the vast
  Stupidity of things.

ENVOY.

CLEAR was the night: the moon was young:
The larkspurs in the plots
Mingled their orange with the gold
Of the forget-me-nots.

The poppies seemed a silver mist:
So darkly fell the gloom.
You scarce had guessed yon crimson streaks
Were buttercups in bloom.

But one thing moved: a little child
Crashed through the flower and fern:
And all my soul rose up to greet
The sage of whom I learn.

I looked into his awful eyes :
  I waited his decree :
I made ingenious attempts
  To sit upon his knee.

The babe upraised his wondering eyes,
  And timidly he said,
" A trend towards experiment
  In modern minds is bred.

"I feel the will to roam, to learn
  By test, experience, *nous,*
That fire is hot and ocean deep,
  And wolves carnivorous.

"My brain demands complexity."
The lisping cherub cried.
I looked at him, and only said,
"Go on. The world is wide."

A tear rolled down his pinafore,
"Yet from my life must pass
The simple love of sun and moon,
The old games in the grass;

"Now that my back is to my home
Could these again be found?"
I looked on him, and only said,
"Go on. The world is round"

PRESS NOTICES—*continued.*

would probably act best: not merely because of its relieving comedy passages, but because the absurd tyranny of circumstances is more graphically suggested, and the capacity of the piece to grip an audience is increased correspondingly. 'Atonement' is the story of a parson with a past, and it is full of bits of observation."—*Topical Times.*

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